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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

5 February 1964

SPECIAL MEMORANDUM NO. 4-64

SUBJECT: Indications of French Policy Toward  
the Indochina States\*

1. In 1954, Diem Bien Phu put an end to French efforts to maintain France's position in Indochina by force of arms. Since then a variety of Frenchmen, at various levels of official and unofficial authority, have been searching for ways to keep a French presence there. Few have ever thought that the US program of military action had much chance of succeeding where France had failed, and a good many have been consciously or unconsciously resentful of the US effort. Especially in the period since the Diem regime began to falter, the thoughts of these Frenchmen have increasingly turned to some form of "neutralization."

2. There has been no consistent or agreed line of policy; both within and outside the French government there have been differences of view as to the nature and even the desirability of

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\* This memorandum has been prepared by O/NE in collaboration with O/CI and DD/P

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"neutralization." In Cambodia, it has often meant the support, or the encouragement, of Sihanouk's own pronounced bent for a balancing act between the US and the Bloc. In Laos, French policy pushed strongly for the establishment of the neutralist government, and has since ignored and sometimes undercut it. In Vietnam, most of the non-official French <sup>residence</sup> have opposed any neutralization scheme.

3. In looking at the current situation, we should also bear in mind two results of the long French suzerainty over Indochina. First, a considerable number of the Frenchmen, both official and unofficial, now active there have been closely identified with the area for many years, have Indochinese wives, etc. Similarly, many prominent Indochinese have close ties to France, some have French citizenship. France is for many of them a haven in times of holiday or exile.

4. Caution must be exercised in speaking of "French" advocacy of neutralization, since in such discourse one is talking about a mixture of official statements, press, radio and TV comment, discreet personal contacts, and various covert actions. Such activities have been indulged in by a variety of Frenchmen -- former colonial administrators, some holding official positions in the government structure, some not; Army officers, some no longer on active duty or officially concerned with Indochinese affairs; and private citizens.

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Of these varied individuals, some may well be (or have been) acting on their own initiative, without official sanction, and some with the approval of their immediate or departmental superiors, but without the approval -- or even knowledge -- of the Government of France. Furthermore, in many instances, Frenchmen resident in, or concerned with, the four separate components of the former Indochinese Union may have been pursuing goals restricted to their local area -- Cambodia, Laos, South or North Vietnam -- rather than consciously furthering any overall design for the whole of the Indochinese peninsula.

5. In short, we seriously doubt if there is or ever has been any long-standing official French plot, policy or "grand design" to secure the neutralization of what used to be French Indochina. On the other hand, for the past nine years there has been a good deal of activity by various French advocates of neutralization, within the past two years the pace of this activity seems to have been picking up, and within recent months it has become progressively apparent that such activity is in increasing harmony with the general trend of de Gaulle's thought -- even though much, if not most, of this activity may not have been instigated or specifically sanctioned by the Elysee.

6. It is against this background that de Gaulle's desire to assert France's position and interests in the world is projected.

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The current difficulties of US policy in Southeast Asia provide him with another opportunity for asserting French independence and countering US influence. He has personal reasons for resentment and grievance against the US, whose influence kept French forces from returning to Indochina immediately after the 1945 Japanese surrender and whose presence since 1955 has largely displaced the French. But he is almost certainly also, and perhaps primarily, moved by the basic judgment that Western, as well as French, interests would best be served by neutralizing the area.

7. "Neutralization," as the term has been used by the French, is an undefined, and vague, concept, which appears to encompass:

- a. A determination by a Saigon government to halt the war effort against the Viet Cong and to seek to promote more normal contacts with the DRV.
- b. The reduction or ending of the US military presence.
- c. The negotiating of some kind of North - South confederation.

8. The French "neutralization" intent in Laos is more clear and explicit: that is, to go along with the troika idea, but attempt (a) to block neutralist - Phoumi cooperation; (b) to replace Kong Le-type neutralists with others, such as General Amkha, who are presently more amenable to French advice and who wish to keep their

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distance from Phoumi; (c) to implement the 1962 Geneva accords by bringing about the fuller integration of NLHX/PL military and political assets in the neutralist government; and (d) to reduce the US presence and US influence in the country.

9. No firm official French intent is evident at present regarding the "neutralization" of Cambodia, other than offering to take up some of the US aid slack and supporting Prince Sihanouk's desires for some kind of multilateral "neutralization" of Cambodia.

10. Back of these various efforts, the principal French considerations, some pragmatic, some emotional, appear to be:

a. A judgment that the problems of the Indochina area are not susceptible of military solution. Accompanying this judgment is a strong, widely-held feeling that the Americans will not be able to accomplish what the French could not.

b. Judgments that the security situation in South Vietnam has steadily deteriorated over the past few years, despite expensive and sustained US effort, and that the chances favor an eventual VC victory -- unless, the US bombs Hanoi or takes other such extreme action.

c. A judgment that the longer a negotiated settlement is delayed in Vietnam, the weaker Western ability will become to salvage some continuing position there.

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d. Judgments that the ending of the war and the concluding of a timely negotiated settlement would strengthen both (1) nationalist, but non-Communist, Vietnamese elements in the North and the South, and (2) DRV ability to withstand Chinese Communist pressures; in result, a future DRV-dominated Vietnam might well become a national Communist entity along Titoist lines.

e. Recognition that France does not have great assets -- men, materials, money -- to bring to bear in the Indochina area, and thus must move in such fashion as to maximize its "special competence," historical and cultural ties, personal contacts, and the like.

f. A judgment that a negotiated settlement in Vietnam cannot be effected without the consent and participation of Communist China.

1) This is doubtless one of the principal causes of de Gaulle's recognition of Peiping. Others probably include: acceptance of the fact of Communist control of the mainland, belief that French recognition would bring to pass a less anomalous China situation in world politics, interest in demonstrating French independence of action, opportunity to exploit Sino-Soviet rupture, and desire to reap some economic reward through increased Sino-French commercial ties and technical cooperation.

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2) We do not know what commitments, if any, the Chinese have given Paris concerning either a Vietnam settlement or French influence in the Indochina area. If any "understandings" exist, they are doubtless deliberately vague. However, France may believe that the Chinese might accept a French presence in the Indochina area, if this promised the lessening of US influence there -- and of Soviet influence in the DRV.

11. With respect to the 30 January coup of General Khanh in South Vietnam:

a. We cannot document Khanh's assertions that General Xuan or other officers actually had an organized coup in motion or at hand. Khanh, however, may well have thought that pro-neutralist sentiment was dangerously on the rise.

b. We cannot document the proposition that Col. Tranh dinh Lan, a known neutralist with especially close ties to the French, and recently returned from Paris, was in fact the bearer of plans or money in support of a pro-neutralist coup.

c. Generals (Big) Minh, Don, and Kim may not have held optimistic estimates of the war's prospects, but (1) we have no evidence which confirms assertions that they were pro-neutralist or in league with the French, and (2) we consider that their conduct of office showed definitely anti-neutralist inclination.

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d. We have no evidence which would cast doubt on Khanh's staunchly anti-neutralist professions.

12. We assume that the French will continue to promote neutralist sentiment in South Vietnam and to play back, there, any sentiment within the US favoring a negotiated settlement of the Vietnam war. Such effort by France will have a disquieting effect in South Vietnam as the French rapprochement with Communist China already has had. We do not consider that it will foreclose all hope of improving the war effort -- so long as the South Vietnamese leaders are convinced that the US is determined to prevent a Communist takeover of South Vietnam.

13. Nevertheless, the atmosphere in Vietnam is an uneasy one, in the wake of two successive coups, the recent French initiatives, and some doubts of the US purposefulness. If the new Khanh regime proves unable, within the next several months, to provide plausible evidence that it is politically and militarily effective enterprise, South Vietnamese war-weariness will grow, and with it a susceptibility to French neutralist counsel.

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